

PIGGYBACKING NORTHWARD: MOVEMENT OF *LEPTOTES CASSIUS* (LYCAENIDAE: LYCAENINAE) THROUGHOUT THE SOUTHEAST

**Additional key words:** butterfly gardening, dispersal, Florida, Georgia, *Plumbago*, South Carolina

The widespread distribution of *Leptotes cassius* Cramer across the many island groups of the West Indies demonstrates its success as a highly effective colonist (Smith et al. 1994). Within the Southeast, *L. cassius* is primarily restricted to south Florida and the Florida Keys where it is generally the most abundant blue of open disturbed sites or semi-open, scrubby habitats. During favorable years with mild winters, it may occasionally expand its range northward through the peninsula into the central and northeastern counties. Records beyond the state's border are rare but isolated vagrants have been reported from Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, Georgia and South Carolina (Opler et al. 1995, Opler and Malikul 1998, Scott 1986,). The exact origin of such strays is unknown and may represent isolated dispersal events, hurricane or tropical storm-assisted movements, or temporary seasonal expansion of breeding populations. A fourth explanation, though, may provide an alternate explanation for many of the confirmed records.

In August 1999, while shopping at a small specialty nursery on Hilton Head Island, Beaufort County, South Carolina, I noticed a small blue flying erratically around a patch of colorful flowers. Upon closer inspection, I was surprised to see that it was a male *L. cassius*. Immediately following the discovery, I searched the remainder of the nursery property and adjacent open areas, but did not observe any additional adults. The nursery did, however, have several one to three gallon planters of *Plumbago auriculata* Lam. (Plumbaginaceae) and *P. auriculata* 'alba' that between them supported 21 larvae ranging from second to fifth instar. I inquired about the origin of the plants and was informed by the nursery staff that they had arrived earlier in the week from a large grower located in south-central Florida.

Between September 1999 to August 2002,

subsequent visits were made to the same Hilton Head nursery and to two other similar specialty garden centers located in Bluffton, Beaufort County, South Carolina and Savannah, Chatham County, Georgia. During this period, adults, immatures, or in some cases small breeding colonies of *L. cassius* were found at each nursery in every year except 2002, when adult individuals were found only at the Hilton Head Island location. In each instance, all three nurseries received shipments of *Plumbago* from the same south-central Florida grower. It is not known if purchased plants harboring livestock led to the establishment of additional local temporary breeding colonies.

With the ever-growing popularity of butterfly gardening and native landscaping, it is likely that the frequency of such human-assisted piggybacking of livestock on nursery plant material will continue to increase and thus serve to blur the legitimacy of some county or state records.

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JARET C. DANIELS, *McGuire Center for Lepidoptera and Biodiversity, Florida Museum of Natural History, P.O. Box 112710, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida 32611-2710. Email: jdaniels@fmnh.ufl.edu.*

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